

“The Lord Has Need of It”

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4-14-19 Palm/Passion Sunday

Based upon Luke 19:28-40

When you think of the Jesus’ birth, what image comes to mind? Mary and Joseph in a barn, right? Lit by a great star, surrounded by shepherds, animals, and three kings just waiting to give the Christ child gifts. This is the scene as most nativity sets depict it, even though it does not appear in the Bible. Christians have long merged *Matthew* and *Luke* in our minds and art, even though their stories are quite different. We’ve heard them both so much we can’t help it. Similarly, we can’t help having a certain mental image of what happened on that first Palm Sunday, when Jesus came to Jerusalem. It is an image filled with great crowds, with palm branches waving, and children crying out “Hosanna!”, an image of Jesus riding a donkey from the Mount of Olives right up to the steps of the Temple, while the religious authorities fume and fuss from the walls of the city. This precise image isn’t in the Bible either. It comes from a merger of the four different gospel accounts, along with the lyrics of today’s opening hymn,¹ and the procession scene from the movie *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It’s a lovely image, which helps us to recognize that the event we are celebrating today was something important and special. But it’s also a problematic image, because when all the gospels are merged together, we can miss many of the important lessons that their authors took pains to weave into their accounts, by intentionally including or excluding certain details. These lessons are not just about who Jesus was and what happened outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, but also about who we, his disciples, are called to be, in our day and world.

So today, as we contemplate Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, I want us to walk in our minds both with him and with Luke very specifically, because his take on the triumph of the day is different in some key respects from the take of the other gospel writers. To begin, we have to set aside our palm branches. You can still keep the ones we gave you and take them home, but know when you do that it was John, not Luke who added that detail, in order to emphasize that Jesus’ parade could have been perceived as a political challenge to the Roman authorities. The palm branch was a symbol of Israel, so waving it like a flag in the occupied city of Jerusalem was quite a subversive gesture. But there are no palm branches in *Luke*, or even the tree branches which appear in *Mark* and *Matthew*. In *Luke*, when the people see Jesus coming, they put their cloaks and coats on the ground to make his red carpet. This act was still fitting for a king. According to *Second Kings*, when the prophet Elisha anointed Jehu king, the first response of the people around him was to spread their cloaks on the bare steps in front of him and praise him. (2 Kings 9:13). But it’s a much subtler political gesture, especially given that the Romans would not have been well-versed in ancient Jewish history.

I’m sorry to say that there are no “Hosannas!” in *Luke* either, sung either by children or adults. Hosanna means “Lord save us!” The other three Gospels have these words on the lips of the people in the crowd. But when it’s time for the people to cry out in *Luke*, they sing a line

¹ “*Hosanna, Loud Hosanna*” was the hymn.

from *Psalms* 118 instead: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” With these words, the people, whom Luke calls “the multitude,” take part in what almost seems like a responsive liturgy begun at Jesus’ birth, when a multitude of angels cried out in like-fashion. “Peace on earth!” the angels cried when Jesus was born. “Peace in heaven,” the human multitude replied when Jesus arrived like a king in Jerusalem. The worship liturgy effect is such that even though Luke changed the words of the psalm so that people were blessing “the king” instead of “the one” who comes in the name of the Lord, the people’s singing of the psalm would not have been enough to support a charge of sedition against Jesus. Luke did this on purpose. For him, this moment was about faith, not politics. It was a religious parade.

In case we had any doubts about this, Luke makes sure that all the key players in the story are religious as well. The “multitude” is made up of Jesus’ disciples only, not residents of Jerusalem drawn to the scene out of curiosity. It seems unlikely that there really was a multitude of them, but however many there were, the disciples were all believers. Thus, in *Luke*, there is no anonymous and fickle crowd which swings from praising Jesus one minute, to condemning him the next. Instead there is a parade of followers who cry out for all to hear “the deeds of power” they have seen Jesus perform. I imagine them shouting, “I was blind and now I see,” or “He healed my dropsy,” or “He healed my leprosy!” Perhaps they spoke of Jesus raising a girl from the dead or feeding five thousand or stilling a storm. Whatever they said it was joyful and faithful.

This is one reason that this parade can be described as triumphant, even though it may have been much smaller than we originally imagined, and even though from a pomp and circumstance standpoint, it would have looked sort of pathetic compared to Pilate’s parade into Jerusalem the day before, which had soldiers, chariots, weapons, and flags. The Palm Sunday procession was triumphant because for once, the disciples – not just the twelve, but all of Jesus’ followers – got it right. They knew what their Lord needed, and they did it. Without questioning Jesus’ odd and potentially troublesome request for them to take someone’s donkey, they did just as he said, and once he was on the donkey, they praised Jesus faithfully for all to hear and see as they walked by his side to Jerusalem.

Jesus’ followers weren’t the only people in this story, however. Luke alone adds that among those who were listening and seeing were some Pharisees. Some of them must have believed to be there, but others were not pleased with the display they saw in this prototypical church parade. “Tell them to be quiet!” the unhappy ones demanded of Jesus, using the same Greek words that are in the story of Jesus rebuking and silencing a storm on the sea of Galilee which threatened his disciples. The Pharisees wanted the storm of praise to cease threatening their world. But Jesus would not still this storm of devotion and praise. “I tell you if they were silent,” Jesus said, “even the stones would cry out!” His retort would have sounded even more biting to them than it sounds to us now because it’s taken from a stanza of divine condemnation in the book of the prophet Habakkuk. “Alas for you, who get evil gain for your house, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm,” the prophet had proclaimed. “You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very

stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.” (Hab. 2:9-11). Jesus would put even more punch behind this message against the religious establishment the next day when he overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple. For now, it was enough simply to suggest that Creation itself was on his side.

Now it’s possible that the Pharisees who objected had very reasonable reasons for doing so. Perhaps they were worried that the Romans would take offense, thinking Jesus was mocking Rome with his parade, and would prevent them from celebrating the Passover. They could have been protecting their faith and/or their lives. But since Luke doesn’t describe their motives expressly or sympathetically, what we are left is a provocative lesson in faithfulness for people who call themselves disciples, born out of the juxtaposition of two authorities and two commands. On the one hand we have the authority of Jesus, who had the divine foreknowledge to know where a donkey would be and how it could be obtained, who had worked amazing miracles of healing, and who had the power in that moment not just to inspire human beings, but even the very rocks of creation as well. On the other hand, we have the religious authorities of Jerusalem, who had lots of human power, but far less spiritual power, and who felt so threatened by all that Jesus was, did, and said that their response was to try to control him and others through rebuke and censorship. On the one hand we have the intriguing phrase “The Lord has need of it,” followed by almost heavenly praise; while on the other hand, we have “We, human authorities, demand,” followed by the unfaithful command that the people “keep silent.”

On the day that Jesus rode into town, his disciples were able to obey the right authority and the right command. They did what the Lord needed and praised his name and his ways to the heavens. But we know that not long after that they fell silent. They probably never joined the crowds crying, “Crucify him!” But they did silence themselves out of fear of what might happen to them if they continued to praise Jesus as their Lord and king. They fled; they hid; they lied. Knowing that about them, we, Jesus’ modern disciples, are invited by Luke’s narrative to examine our own choices. Do we choose faithful obedience and full voice, or disobedience and silence? Why?

In our hearts, we know what “the Lord has need of,” if not in terms of specific actions, like getting a donkey for a parade, then at least in terms of general behavior. What does the Lord require of you? Micah asked, “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” What are the two greatest commandments? Jesus said, “Love God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” It may feel strange to us to think of the Lord *needing* these things from us. Our concept of God is of a being who is self-sufficient and all powerful. We have needs; God doesn’t. But that doesn’t mean that God has no expectations of us. God our Parent expects us to love, not hurt others, because we are all God’s children. God our Covenant partner expects us to serve Christ. That means God needs us to do our contractual job of being the body of Christ in the world. God needs our hands and feet working to take care of the least of these, and God needs our mouths, speaking out against injustice, and calling for peace on earth and in heaven.

If we know this, then why isn't every day a parade for us? We don't need to shout Hosanna because we know the Lord has already saved us. But why aren't we more vocal in celebrating Christ's way and deeds, and calling for justice and righteousness and peace? Today I'm not talking so much about evangelism, in the sense of trying to convert people to Christ, although that is a form of faith speech other gospels call us to share. Today I am talking about allying ourselves visibly and vocally with everything Jesus stood for and embodied – truth, love, help, hope, justice, righteousness, inclusion, and generosity – as clearly and unequivocally as if we were waving his flag in a parade.

This past week there was an article in AARP magazine about Dr. Jan Pol, a vet from Michigan who has a TV show on *National Geographic Wild* about his practice.² Nathaniel and I watch the show fairly obsessively. In the interview Dr. Pol said the producers of the show initially asked him to argue with his son on camera to make the show more interesting. His response was, "I'm not going to do it; our family loves each other. My wife, Diane, and I go to church every Sunday, and we believe in treating others how we would want to be treated." I was so touched when I read this. Without being obnoxious or preachy, he made it clear he's a parade-participant and always will be.

Most of us have had moments when we also have been given a similar choice either to reveal ourselves as parade participants or to keep silent. Should we speak up when someone tells a joke at someone else's expense? Should we speak up when we hear or read about people spreading untruths? Should we speak up when we hear or read about people denigrating certain kinds of human beings? In moments such as these, there are all kinds of social and psychological authorities expressly or subconsciously telling us to keep our mouth shut, so like the first disciples, we often do. Think about why you have kept silent in such moments. Now think about what you would have done if Jesus had been riding by in that moment. We need to stand up for Jesus' way of goodness, justice, and love because the news is filled regularly with reports of Christians condoning racism, sexism, greed, oppression, and even violence in the name of Christ. There are far fewer stories about Christians objecting to these things because of their allegiance to Jesus. I'm not exactly sure why this is given that the Gospel clearly objects to them. But I do believe that Leonardo da Vinci was right when he observed, "Nothing strengthens authority so much as silence."³ If we want our world to be more like the kingdom of God, we need to make it clear who our greatest authority is and why in a more public way.

There's an old joke – I'm not sure where it came from originally – about a family who had a young daughter who woke up sick on Palm Sunday. She had to stay home instead of going to church. When the rest of the family returned, she asked, "How was church?" Her mother responded, "We had a parade for Jesus and waved palm branches in the air." "Nuts," she replied. "Wouldn't you know that the one time I miss church, Jesus actually shows up." We don't need to wave palm branches for Jesus to show up, although it's fun to have a parade for him. All we have

² "Dr. Jan Pol: The reality-show vet on what all creatures- even humans- need most", Upfront/ What I Know Now column, AARP THE MAGAZINE, April/May 2019, 15.

³ See *Dissent Quotes*, Goodreads.com, retrieved April 9, 2019 from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/dissent>.

to do to be with him is to follow him and refuse to be silenced. The Lord has need of us to do so, and so does our world. May the Spirit give us the courage and faith to do so, this day and every day. Amen.